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Looking beyond the text: Some reflections on the challenges of engaging with Feminist Conversation Analysis

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Invited commentary on Whelan paper: *Qualitative Research in Psychology*

Pauline Whelan makes some interesting and thought-provoking points about the recent emergence of Feminist Conversation Analysis (hereafter FCA), and its relatively rapid proliferation within some sections of social science, especially in the UK. She engages in some depth with the 2000 paper by Celia Kitzinger, which is taken as a “rough starting point” for this phenomenon, and with Susan Speer’s more recent text *‘Gender Talk’* (Kitzinger, 2000; Speer, 2005).

Reading Pauline Whelan’s paper reminded me of my own attempt at critical engagement with a different set of arguments that emerged from a broadly CA perspective. That is, the notion prevailing in discursive psychology that qualitative social research should be the default option in the analysis of ‘naturally occurring data/talk’, rather than talk generated in research interviews (Griffin, 2007). I remembered just how difficult and tortuous a process I found it to engage with these debates, how complex I found the technical language of the papers I read as I developed my ideas, and how defended the style of argument required. I persevered with that paper because of a strong sense of how important it felt to try and interrupt a set of assumptions about the preferred way to do qualitative research. Some of my arguments in that paper resonate with Pauline Whelan’s points, especially the notion that the FCA might:

“call for adherence to particular modes of presenting and analysing data simultaneously fuels and feeds positivistic demands for quantification and replication. In colluding with such demands I suggest that feminist conversation analysts verge dangerously close to a privileging and prioritising of particular research methods” (Whelan, 2011, p.13).

Kitzinger’s initial paper on FCA made a case for “including CA among our array of analytic approaches” (2000, p.189), which did not constitute FCA as superior or preferable to other approaches, leaving space for engagement with different perspectives. By 2007, in her editorial introduction to the *‘Feminism and Psychology’* feature on FCA research, Kitzinger argued that “gender and sexuality researchers are increasingly turning to CA as a method for understanding the routine reproduction of sexism, heterosexism and other forms of power, and of resistance, at the mundane level of everyday life” (2007a, p.133). If FCA is constituted as the approach that increasing numbers of researchers are “turning to”, rather like a superior brand of washing powder, then the implication is that alternative approaches are to be turned away from rather than engaged with in any depth. However, this is by no means an argument for FCA as a default option. Susan Speer

made a rather stronger statement (quoted by Whelan) when she argued that she knew of “no other approach which offers a more viable basis from which to drive social change” (2005, p.192). FCA is often constituted (or often constitutes itself) as in competition with other approaches, rather than as a potentially complementary approach, although several FCA researchers have taken the latter view (eg. Guimaraes, 2007; Kitzinger, 2000; Stockill, 2006; Toerien and Kitzinger, 2007).

The problem here, as Whelan points out, is that some elements of FCA make it particularly difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue beyond the relatively strict tenets and preferences associated with the CA perspective (Billig, 1999; Wetherell, 1998). This may be a product of the ethnomethodological theoretical framework on which FCA is based. It may result from the endorsement of participants’ rather than analysts’ interpretations, and the relative disapproval of the latter. It may be a consequence of the highly technical language and procedures involved in CA, which can serve to cut this work (and researchers using this approach) off from other perspectives. It could be a combination of these factors. That said, there are many exponents of CA-informed research who are very open to dialogue and collaboration with non-CA researchers (eg. Harris and Rampton, 2009; Rapley, 2001; Wetherell and Edley, 1999), so this phenomenon is not endemic to the CA perspective.

The ‘feminist’ element of FCA is generally constituted as a political standpoint and/or a tool for bringing about social change, as well as referring to the topics selected and the orientation of the analysis to issues such as ‘how gender and/or sexuality is performed’ in everyday talk. So for example, Celia Kitzinger began her key paper on FCA by defining feminism as “a politics predicated on the belief that women are oppressed; a social movement dedicated to political change” (2000, p.163). Many FCA projects explore the implications of their analysis for feminist understandings of the ways in which social relations around gender and sexuality operate in practice (eg. Kitzinger, 2007b). However, FCA research tends to pay relatively little attention to the cultural, political and economic context in which such studies are embedded. Phelan identifies this as a “fundamental tension” within FCA, situating this tension in the way that (F)CA tends to separate ‘politics’ from ‘analysis’ (eg. Speer, 2005).

The first question I often ask myself in approaching research work is ‘what is happening here?’ and then ‘what is this symptomatic of?’, followed by ‘why is this happening now?’ The first two questions are generated from what Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson refer to as a ‘symptomatic reading’, and the last question reflects what they term a ‘conjunctural analysis’ (Griffin, 2011; Hall and Jefferson, 2006). FCA research focuses on the first question with a great deal of intensity, but often fails to acknowledge the potential importance of the other two lines of inquiry. I want to consider, very

briefly, some elements of the wider context in which much FCA research is taking place, referencing contemporary feminist theory and debate.

FCA work also tends to lack any substantial engagement with current feminist social theory concerning wider cultural discourses and ideologies around gender, class, race and sexuality. FCA appeared at a very particular social, historical, political cultural moment: namely during the growth and expansion of neo-liberalism and the emergence of post-feminism (Gill, 2007; Walkerdine, 2003). The term 'post-feminism' refers to a complex, highly contradictory and pervasive cultural discourse that emerged in response to second wave feminism and in which feminism is "simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated" as redundant (Gill, 2007, p.161; McRobbie, 2004). Ros Gill views post-feminism as a 'sensitivity' made up of a "patterned articulation of ... ideas" (2007, p.147). These include: "the notion of femininity as a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualisation, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference" (2007, p. 147).

Valerie Walkerdine has focused on the particular contradiction between the (limited) opening up of the labour market to women, and especially to (some) young women in affluent industrial societies; the sense that young women can be and do anything they want; and the intensification of (sexualised) feminine commodification as young women are increasingly represented as objects of consumption (Walkerdine, 2003). This is reflected in the numerous 'reality' TV make-over shows in which women are transformed (and transform themselves) to conform to a (white) middle class aesthetic through which they are urged to 'become somebody' (Skeggs, 2005). The aspirational figure of the 'nice girl' that epitomised 'good' respectable femininity has faded from view, to be replaced by a 'sassy' new female subject, who must remain in a state of perpetual youth, assertiveness and optimism (McRobbie, 2004). It remains extremely difficult to find the 'right' way of doing femininity, since women are increasingly likely to be constituted as projects that require continual self-surveillance and transformation, yet are always found wanting (Griffin, 2009). It is possible to argue that such pressures are nothing new for women, but post-feminist discourse brings a distinctive intensity and level of complexity and contradiction to the constitution of contemporary femininities (Evans et al., 2010; Griffin, 2009).

It is possible to argue that such theoretical formulations concerning the wider cultural and political context in which talk-in-interaction occurs are the province of sociology and/or cultural studies, and have nothing to do with psychology – or CA. However, most of the authors cited above are feminist

psychologists – and more importantly, feminist theory and research is an inter-disciplinary endeavour that has never been constrained by traditional academic boundaries. I would not expect FCA to engage with this wider context in a detailed or comprehensive way – any more than I would expect non-CA studies to conduct in-depth CA analyses of their data. But I would hope that CA research (where it is relevant) might acknowledge the importance of the wider context in which data are generated – to ‘look up from the text’ beyond the boundaries of CA with rather more frequency and sense of active engagement.

It would be heartening to see more evidence of some awareness of such debates and the possible impact of this wider context on participants’ talk (though there are exceptions here, see Toerien and Kitzinger, 2007). One might expect changes in power relations around gender, sexuality, class and race to be reflected in some of the data analysed by FCA researchers. However, if FCA researchers orient primarily to CA, then it will be difficult to make such connections and opportunities will be missed. If FCA research is equally oriented to feminism, including feminist theory, then opportunities for dialogue can only expand. However, the ‘fundamental tension’ between key tenets of feminism and of CA identified by Whelan may prove insurmountable: only time will tell.

(1,600 words approx)

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